

REQUESTS AND APOLOGIES: A COMPARISON BETWEEN NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH



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Even though several pragmatic concepts and theories have been related to second language acquisition, the most fruitful area of interaction between pragmatic theory and second language acquisition is that related to speech act theory and interlanguage (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993).

This article focuses on the pragmatic dimension of communicative competence. Specifically, it analyses the role of the subject's linguistic background and the interlocutor's social status and gender in the linguistic expressions used to perform speech acts in English.

Participants were 96 university students who undertook a discourse completion task of the speech acts of requesting and apologizing. The article discusses the responses given by native and non-native speakers of English as related to linguistic and social psychological elements. Interesting differences between native and non-native speakers of English indicate that even though pragmatic principles are universal the linguistic expression used to convey pragmatic meanings are language and context specific.

INTRODUCTION

The concept *communicative competence* was proposed by Hymes (1972) as a reaction to Chomsky's (1965) concept of competence and included not only referential elements of language but also social aspects related to language use. Later proposals of this concept, which have been extremely influential in second language acquisition theory and practice, include grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence (Canale & Swain 1980). Recent models of communicative competence (Bachman 1990; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell 1994) add a further component, called illocutionary or actional competence that refers to the pragmatic aspects of language competence which are associated with language use, aspects that had also been recognized by Chomsky (1980).

Pragmatic competence can be defined as "the ability to convey and understand communicative intent by performing and interpreting speech acts and language functions" (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell 1994). The areas of pragmatics that have been most influential in second language acquisition research are those of speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) and politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987; Leech 1983). Pragmatic theories have also been applied to first language acquisition and it has been proved (Gleason 1993) that speech acts are acquired together with the formal properties of language from a very early age.

The study of pragmatic competence and second language acquisition is clearly interdisciplinary as it is related to theoretical linguistics, sociolinguistics, and social psychology. Two aspects of pragmatic competence have been distinguished: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence (Thomas 1983). Pragmalinguistic competence can be understood as the range of linguistic expressions by which language users perform speech acts. Sociopragmatic competence refers to the contextual distribution of the linguistic

expressions and how this distribution relates to the relevant contextual factors such as social power and social distance. Even though pragmatic principles and processes can be universal and some aspects of the production and comprehension of speech acts need not be learned again, the forms chosen to convey pragmatic meanings are specific and obey language and culture conventions. Learning to convey speech acts in a second language involves learning not only linguistic expressions but also new social attitudes about the use of these expressions.

Speech acts tend to be analysed as part of the L2 learners' interlanguage and interlanguage pragmatics "seeks to describe and explain learners' development and use of pragmatic knowledge" (Kasper 1989: 42). Although interlanguage pragmatics is a relatively new area, several speech acts (requests, apologies, complaints) produced by learners of different languages have been examined (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989; Kasper & Blum-Kulka 1993).

Research involving the comprehension and production of speech acts in different languages contributes to identify universal and language specific aspects of pragmatic competence. The realization of speech acts has also been found to be related to contextual variables, such as gender and social status (Olshtain 1989; Zimin 1981).

The purpose of the study presented here was to examine the linguistic expressions used to convey two speech acts, requests and apologies, by native and non-native speakers of English. Requests and apologies present different characteristics because a request is a 'pre-event' act that implies a cost to the addressee and an apology a 'post-event' act that implies a cost to the speaker. The linguistic and cultural backgrounds involved in this study were expected to be related to some misunderstandings that have been reported between American and Basque university students in the Basque Country.

The specific research questions addressed in this study were the following:

1. Do native and non-native speakers of English use the same linguistic expressions to make requests and apologies?
2. Do these linguistic expressions vary according to the situation?
3. Are these linguistic expressions linked to the subject's and addressee's gender and relative status?

METHOD

1. SUBJECTS

A total of 96 native and non-native university students participated in this study. The native speakers' group (34) was formed by 13 male and 21 female subjects who were studying Basque and Spanish at the University Studies Abroad Consortium in San Sebastian. The non-native speakers' group (62) was integrated by 10 male and 52 female students of English Philology at the University of the Basque Country in Vitoria-Gasteiz. All American students were native speakers of English while Basque students were either native speakers of Spanish or native speakers of Basque, who were also proficient in Spanish.

2. INSTRUMENTS

The instrument used to elicit data was a discourse-completion test (DCT) based on Blum-Kulka (1982). The test was administered in English and included eight socially differentiated situations, four of which elicited requests and the others apologies (see appendix

1). The subjects were asked to write the utterances that they would produce in these situations in which the social distance between the participants and the addressee's gender and status were specified.

The variables addressee's status (lower-equal/higher) and gender (male/female) were manipulated (2 x 2) and four different DCTs were randomly distributed among the American and Basque students.

3. PROCEDURE

Each subject completed one DCT and a general information questionnaire during their regular class period. The DCTs were codified according to the CCSARP Coding Manual (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989) and subsequent statistic analysis were performed using the SPSS programme.

RESULTS

The present study was designed to analyse the differences between native speakers of English and second language learners when producing requests and apologies. In order to do this, some linguistic expressions generally associated with requests and apologies were selected for the analyses. These expressions were alerters, request strategies, syntactic downgraders, and lexical and phrasal downgraders in the case of requests; and alerters, intensifiers, lexical and phrasal downgraders, and taking on responsibility for apologies (see appendix 2).

Several chi-square analyses were carried out in order to examine the differences between native and non-native speakers of English. The results in the following tables correspond to the percentages of native and non-native speakers of English using each of the linguistic expressions (Ns=native speakers; NNs=non-native speakers).

TABLE I REQUESTS				
	BOOK	HANDOUTS	PHONE	PARKING
	Ns NNs	Ns NNs	Ns NNs	Ns NNs
ALERTERS	82% 65%	71% 68%	76% 64%	61% 48%
PREPARATORY	82% 87%	85% 87%	76% 84%	73% 81%
SYN. DOWNGRADERS	82% 95%	94% 98%	82% 95%	77% 87%
LEX. & PHRASAL	59% 51%	47% 42%	35% 65%	79% 81%

The results included in table I show several interesting patterns when comparing the requests uttered by native and non-native speakers of English. Native speakers used more alerters to draw the hearer's attention than non-native speakers in the four situations and the difference is almost significant for the 'book' situation ($p=0.07$). American subjects used a combination of alerters ('excuse me, madam') more frequently than Basque speakers and both groups used less alerters in the 'parking' situation.

The most common strategy used both by native and non-native speakers was the preparatory ('can I?', 'could I?') and non-native speakers used it slightly more often than American subjects although the differences do not reach significance. The different situations do not seem to have an important effect on the use of the preparatory strategy.

Other differences regarding the request strategy which are not included in table I are also interesting. Native speakers used locutionary derivables ('you must/should') more often (10%) than non-native speakers (0.2%) and this difference was particularly noteworthy in the third situation where locutionary derivables were used by 21% of the American speakers and by no Basque subjects. The differences related to other strategies (mood derivable, hints and want statements) were only marginal.

Both American and Basque speakers used syntactic downgraders in all the situations. Non-native speakers tended to use a wider range of syntactic downgraders (interrogatives, conditionals, past) than native speakers, who used mainly interrogatives. Non-native speakers also used a larger number of syntactic downgraders than American subjects and the differences between the two groups are significant for the 'book' ($p=0.03$) and 'phone' ($p=0.03$) situations. Both American and Basque subjects used more syntactic downgraders in the second situation and less in the fourth.

The use of lexical and phrasal downgraders seemed to vary in accordance with different situations and both American and Basque speakers used them more often in the fourth situation. Native speakers used more lexical and phrasal downgraders in some situations and non-native speakers in others, and the difference between the two groups reaches significance for the third situation ($p=0.05$) where Basques subjects used them more often than native speakers. Native speakers used more politeness markers ('please') and learners tended to use more understaters ('a little, a bit').

TABLE II APOLOGIES				
	LATE	DRINK	CAR	SUPERMARKET
	Ns NNs	Ns NNs	Ns NNs	Ns NNs
ALERTERS	67% 35%	47% 30%	87% 61%	62% 36%
INTENSIFIERS	39% 35%	71% 63%	25% 47%	82% 67%
LEX. & PHRASAL	97% 97%	94% 87%	41% 59%	85% 84%
RESPONS.	97% 95%	21% 25%	25% 21%	41% 46%

Although less alerters were used in the case of apologies the results presented in table II show the same pattern as in the case of requests. Native speakers of English used more alerters than non-native speakers in the four situations: 'late' ($p=0.00$), 'drink' ($p=0.09$), 'car' ($p=0.00$), 'supermarket' ($p=0.01$). Native speakers also tended to use the addressee's first name ('John') or a combination of alerters ('excuse me, John') more often than Basque subjects. The use of alerters is also related to context and both groups use more alerters in the third situation and less alerters in the second.

Native speakers used more intensifiers than non-native speakers, especially adverbials ('so, really') and combinations ('Oh, I'm terribly sorry') in three of the four situations although the differences are only significant in the 'car' situation ($p=0.03$), in which

learners used more intensifiers than native speakers. The use of intensifiers seems to be very closely related to the situations and both groups used more intensifiers in the 'supermarket' situation.

There were not very important differences regarding the use of lexical and phrasal downgraders by the two groups. These expressions were very frequent in the first situation and not so common in the third.

Taking on responsibility when apologizing seems to be strongly affected by the situation. Both groups tended to assume responsibility in the first situation but there were no important differences between them.

In order to answer the third research question, the effect of the subject's and addressee's gender, and relative status on the production of alerters in requests and apologies was analysed. Alerters were selected for two reasons. First, because they are common for the two speech acts analysed in this study and second, because the previous analyses had shown some interesting differences regarding the use of alerters by native and non-native speakers of English.

TABLE III ALERTERS IN REQUESTS			
	SUBJECT'S GENDER	ADDRESSEE'S GENDER	ADDRESSEE'S STATUS
	male female	male female	- = +
Ns	67% 76%	75% 70%	93% 87% 59%
NN	60% 62%	59% 63%	72% 75% 30%
s			

The percentages presented in table III indicate that both male and female American subjects used more alerters than male and female Basque subjects. They also indicate that native speakers used more alerters than learners both when addressing male and female interlocutors and when their addressee's status was lower, equal, and higher. The most important differences between the two groups are those corresponding to female subjects ($p=0.03$) in the first situation and addressees of a lower status in the fourth situation ($p=0.06$). Both groups of speakers used more alerters when addressing interlocutors of a lower or equal status than when their addressees present a higher status.

TABLE IV ALERTERS IN APOLOGIES			
	SUBJECT'S GENDER	ADDRESSEE'S GENDER	ADDRESSEE'S STATUS
	male female	male female	- = +
Ns	62% 67%	69% 62% 43% 37%	65% 67%
NN	34% 29%		32% 58%
s			

Table IV also indicates that native speakers of English used more alerters than non-native speakers for all the apologies. The differences between female speakers are significant for the 'late' ($p=0.00$) 'car' ($p=0.00$), and 'supermarket' ($p=0.01$) situations. The differences between male native and non-native speakers are significant for the 'late' situation ($p=0.00$). The differences between females are significant in most situations when the addressee's gender is considered: 'late' ($p=0.04$) 'car' ($p=0.04$), and 'supermarket' ($p=0.04$). The differences between the two groups are also significant when addressing male interlocutors in the 'late' situation ($p=0.03$). The differences between native and non-native speakers regarding status are significant when addressing an interlocutor of the same status in the 'late' ($p=0.00$) and 'car' ($p=0.00$) situations. The differences are not so important when addressing somebody of a higher status, although they are significant for the 'supermarket' situation ($p=0.05$).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show some interesting differences between native and non-native speakers of English. Native speakers of English use more alerters and locution derivable strategies than Basque speakers and Basque subjects use more syntactic downgraders in requests while American speakers use more intensifiers in apologies. The native speakers' use of alerters and intensifiers confirms most studies on interlanguage pragmatics (Fukushima, 1990; Koike 1989; Trosborg, 1987) that have reported that native speakers of English use more politeness markers than non-native speakers, who tend to be more direct. This directness is also supported by the less frequent use of combinations of alerters and intensifiers by non-native speakers. The learners' frequent use of syntactic downgraders in requests is consistent with previous findings (Faerch & Kasper 1989) and could be explained both as transfer from Spanish and as characteristic of learners' interlanguage.

The different linguistic expressions used by the two groups are in good accordance with the different sociopragmatic characteristics of the situations. The use of preparatories as a request strategy depends less on contextual factors and confirms the extended use of this strategy (Kasper 1989). The analysis of apologies confirms previous findings (Bergman & Kasper, 1993) in which the severity of the offense does not imply the assumption of responsibility.

The fact that no significant differences between male and female speakers were found supports some previous studies on interlanguage pragmatics (Fraser, 1981; Tanaka & Kawada, 1982) but not earlier reports about linguistic differences between male and female speakers (Lakoff, 1973). Cross-linguistic differences, especially those between native and non-native females, are more important than differences between male and female speakers. The less frequent use of alerters regardless of the addressee's status also confirms these cross-linguistic differences.

The restrictive use of alerters and other politeness markers by Basque students of English seems to provide evidence for pragmatic interference. Learners seem to use previously known strategies (understaters, conditionals) that they transfer to the target language. At the same time they seem to be estimating the degree of deference that is necessary in different contexts. This estimation can lead to the overuse of some politeness markers such as syntactic downgraders. The most striking difference between the two groups, that of alerters, seems to be especially relevant in pragmatic competence because of their position in the utterance and their restrictive use can be regarded as impolite by native speakers of English.

Although this study only analyses some specific aspects of pragmatic competence, interesting differences between native and non-native speakers of English have been found.

The study of pragmatic competence can surely increase our understanding of interlanguage and provide useful insights for language teaching.

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APPENDIX 1: SITUATIONS TO ELICIT REQUESTS AND APOLOGIES

1. A teacher/student asks a student to get a book from the library
 2. A student asks a teacher/fellow student for his/her lecture notes
 3. You need to make a long distance phone call and you ask a colleague/teacher to make this call from his/her apartment.
 4. A traffic warden/driver asks a driver/traffic warden to move his/her car (or for permission to park).
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1. You get to work late and your boss/colleague is looking at his/her watch.
 2. A waiter/customer spills some wine on a woman's/man's/sister in law's/brother in law's jacket.
 3. You borrow a fellow student's/your boss's car to go to hospital but when you come out of hospital the car is no longer there
 4. You bump into a middle aged man/woman at the supermarket and all his/her groceries tumble to the floor. (That man/woman is your doctor)

APPENDIX 2: EXAMPLES OF THE LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS ANALYSED IN THE STUDY (BLUM-KULKA, HOUSE & KASPER, 1989)

REQUESTS

ALERTERS: title/role (*Professor, Waiter*), surname (*Johnson*), first name (*Judith*), nickname (*Judy*), endearment term (*honey*), offensive term (*stupid cow*), pronoun (*you*), attention getter (*excuse me*).

REQUEST STRATEGY: mood derivable (*leave me alone*), explicit performative (*I am asking*), hedged performative (*I must ask you*), locution derivable (*you'll have to/must/ought to*), want statement (*I'd like to*), suggestory formula (*how about*); preparatory (*can I/could I*), hint (*I haven't got a phone*).

SYNTACTIC DOWNGRADERS: interrogative (*can I?*), negation of a preparatory condition (*you couldn't*), subjunctive (*might be better if you were to*), conditional (*I would suggest you to*), aspect (*I'm wondering*), tense (*I wanted to ask*).

LEXICAL & PHRASAL DOWNGRADERS: politeness marker (*please*), understater (*a bit, a little*), hedge (*somehow, kind of*), subjectivizer (*I'm afraid, I wonder*), downtoner (*possibly, perhaps*), cajoler (*you know*), appealer (*will you?*).

APOLOGIES

ALERTERS: the same expressions used in the case of requests.

INTENSIFIERS: intensifying adverbials (*very/terribly/awfully*), emotional expressions / exclamations (*Oh, Oh no*), expressions marked for register (*I do apologize*), double intensifier (*really dreadfully, very very*), please (*please forgive me*).

LEXICAL & PHRASAL DOWNGRADERS: the same expressions used in the case of requests

TAKING ON RESPONSIBILITY: explicit self-blame (*my mistake*), lack of intent (*I didn't mean to upset you*), justify hearer (*you're right to be angry*), expression of embarrassment (*I feel awful about it*), admission of facts but not responsibility (*I haven't had time to do it*), refusal to acknowledge guilt (*it wasn't my fault*).

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